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ABSTRACT

Changing socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic forces have caused educational nonparticipation among adults to be treated as a social issue. Recent research has attempted to combine dispositional, situational, and environmental factors into composite models of participation. These models have suggested the following categories of deterrence factors: individual, family, or home-related problems; cost concerns; questionable available educational opportunities, negative perceptions of the value of education in general, lack of motivation and/or self-confidence, a general tendency toward nonaffiliation, and incompatibilities of time and/or place. These deterrents can be addressed by providing educational opportunities with low levels of risk or threat, administrative accommodation (such as alternative scheduling or extended hours for counseling), and effective communication of timely and appropriate information about educational opportunities targeted to the needs and concerns of various special needs audiences. Traditional marketing concepts can also be used to reach hard-to-reach learners. These include (1) a market analysis assessing market segmentation, clientele, and competition and (2) a program orchestration effort establishing an appropriate marketing mix of price, product, place, promotion, and partners. (This digest includes specific strategies for addressing the special needs of reentry women, elderly individuals, educationally disadvantaged persons, and rural adults.) (MN)

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OVERVIEW

ERIC® DIGEST NO.59

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

DETERRENTS TO PARTICIPATION IN ADULT EDUCATION

Unlike its childhood counterpart, adult education is mainly a voluntary activity. The fact that only some adults engage in educational activities would be of little consequence were it not for the needs and expectations of society. However, changing socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic forces as well as the democratic ideal of equal opportunity cause educational nonparticipation among adults to be treated as a social issue.

This *Overview* examines existing models and theories that attempt to explain participatory behavior. Types of barriers or deterrents that hinder participation are described. Finally, general guidelines and specific examples of successful approaches to stimulating participation offer strategies to address deterrents to adult education. In this context, a deterrent to participation is defined as a reason or group of reasons contributing to an adult's decision not to engage in learning activities (Scanlan 1986).

Theoretical Foundations

Early attempts to explain why adults participate or fail to participate in education considered the potential impact of changes in life circumstances upon participatory behavior. Educational activity was seen as the interplay between personal needs and social structures. When both needs and social structures drive a person toward an educational objective, the likelihood of participation should be high.

Three recent approaches attempt to combine dispositional, situational, and environmental factors into composite models of participation. First, Rubenson's (1977) Recruitment Paradigm emphasizes the perceptual components of the individual's lifespace. That is, actual experiences, needs, and environmental factors are less important in determining behavior than how they are perceived and interpreted by the potential learner. Cross' (1981) Chain-of-Response Model conceives of participation as a result of a complex chain of responses originating within the individual. Internal psychological variables such as self-concept and attitude toward education are critical determinants of prospective learners' decision making.

The third recent formulation, Darkenwald and Merriam's (1982) Psychosocial Interaction Model, illustrates participatory behavior as determined by a continuum of responses to internal and external stimuli. The degree of probability of participation is affected by such variables as socioeconomic status, perceived value of participation, readiness to participate, and barriers to participation.

These theories and models imply that a variety of variables are associated with participatory behavior. A number of researchers have explored the influence of such demographic variables as age, sex, income, race, educational attainment, employment status, and geographic location. Nondemographic variables affecting participation are categorized as situational—associated with individual life circumstances, particularly in terms of career and social roles; dispositional—associated with values, attitudes, beliefs, or opinions; or psychological—associated with individual psychological or personality traits.

Categories of Deterrence Factors

However, the research evidence shows that these demographic and nondemographic variables of and by themselves are not deterrents to participation. Instead, these research findings demonstrate that (1) "deterrents" is a multidimensional concept, encompassing clusters of variables; (2) these variables are influenced by prospective learners' perceptions of their magnitude; and (3) the impact of these variables on participation behavior varies according to individual characteristics and life circumstances.

Synthesis of these findings suggests the following categories of deterrence factors (Scanlan 1986):

- Individual, family, or home-related problems
- Cost concerns
- Questionable worth, relevance, or quality of available educational opportunities
- Negative perceptions of the value of education in general
- Lack of motivation or indifference toward learning
- Lack of self-confidence in one's learning abilities
- A general tendency toward nonaffiliation
- Incompatibilities of time and/or place

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Strategies to Address Deterrents

The multiple factors deterring participation and their differential impact mean that a number of different approaches are needed to encourage adult involvement in educational activities. General guidelines for addressing deterrents include the following (Cross 1981).

- Ways of overcoming the powerful deterrents of poor self-concept and negative attitudes toward education include providing educational opportunities with low levels of risk or threat, reinforcement of self-concept, more positive personal experiences early in the educational career, and the support of adults' significant others.
- Situational and institutional deterrents can be addressed by administrative accommodations (alternative scheduling, extended hours for counseling), student services (transportation, child care), and distance teaching.
- Effective communication of accurate, timely, and appropriate information about educational opportunities must be targeted to the particular needs, expectations, and concerns of the intended audience.

Marketing Educational Services

Traditional marketing concepts can also be applied to reach hard-to-reach learners. Marketing can be a proactive means of

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attending to the multiple variables affecting participation and the differential impact of these factors on various groups.

The first important process in marketing is market analysis (Beder 1980). Components of this process are (1) market segmentation—dividing potential participants into categories based on similar needs and expectations; (2) clientele analysis—assessment of attitudes, values, and perceptions and determination of the demand for programming; and (3) assessment of the competition—analysis of the various opportunities and options available to prospective learners.

The second major component of marketing, program orchestration (Beder 1980), is achieved by establishing the appropriate marketing mix of price, product, place, promotion, and partners.

Price. In terms of participation, program fees represent only one element of price. Hidden costs such as food, travel, childcare, materials, and the opportunity cost of loss of income must be considered.

Product. In addition to perceptions of the tangible (course, program, etc.), participation is affected by consideration of the activity's total meaning to prospective learners—the augmented product.

Place. Inaccessibility, cost, and previous negative experiences in a school environment are deterrents that make selection of the location of educational activities a crucial factor.

Promotion. Information about educational opportunities must also be designed to change negative attitudes, enhance motivation, and provide value-added incentives such as stipends for job trainees or continuing education units for professionals.

Partners. Joint sponsorship and interagency referral and cooperation can help alleviate situational and institutional barriers.

Successful Program Approaches

The application of these strategies for overcoming deterrents among different groups of hard-to-reach learners is illustrated in this section.

Entry Women

The major factors deterring reentry women from pursuing education include poor self-concept, home-related problems, lack of awareness, cost, and incompatibilities of time and place. Programs successful in helping reentry women prepare for career or life transitions treat education as only one need among many. Planning for this group should focus on raising self-esteem, developing autonomy, helping women cope with role conflict and discrimination, providing support services like child care, and establishing a learning environment free of threat and considerate of the influence of prior socialization.

The Elderly

Among the deterrents most likely to hinder the elderly are personal (particularly health) problems, questionable relevance of programming, cost, accessibility, and social nonaffiliation. This requires programming that is (1) direct, establishing linkages with the elderly community; (2) personal, providing a supportive environment attendant to individual needs and sensitive to physiological and psychological effects of aging; and (3) accessible, paying attention to physical comfort, transportation needs, and scheduling concerns.

The Educationally Disadvantaged

The predominant barriers hindering the participation of this group are lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem, and negative attitudes toward education, compounded by language or literacy problems. Recruitment should focus on community-based strategies, identifying problems important to the community. Personal contact (such as door-to-door and word-of-mouth recruiting) and use of existing social networks can influence these prospective learners' dispositions toward learning.

Rural Adults

Inaccessibility, lack of support services, cost, and job and family conflicts often deter rural adults from participation. Successful rural adult education must be considered an integral part of overall rural development, providing advisement, counseling, and support services appropriate for the surroundings. The Cooperative Extension Service, a model of successful rural adult education, places heavy emphasis on use of local resources, facilities, and networks and solution of practical problems of immediate concern to its constituency.

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This ERIC Digest is based on the following publication:

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